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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA CONVICTS PRIEST FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
VIOLATIONS FROM THE 1970S DIRTY WAR

Summary

¶1. (U) Christian Von Wernich, a Roman Catholic priest and ex-chaplain of the Buenos Aires Police during Argentina's 1976-1983 Dirty War, was convicted October 9 of being an accomplice in several cases of murder, torture and illegal imprisonment. Von Wernich is the third ex-military official from the Dirty War period and first ecclesiastical figure to be tried and convicted of such crimes since the 2005 Argentina Supreme Court decision voiding immunity for ex-military personnel. The local leadership of the Catholic Church issued a press statement calling on Von Wernich to repent and seek public forgiveness, and noted the church's past requests for forgiveness and societal reconciliation.
End Summary.

Von Wernich Guilty As Charged

¶2. (U) Christian Von Wernich, ex-chaplain of the Buenos Aires police force during Argentina's 1976-1983 Dirty War (when the police were under the supervision of the military), was convicted October 9 for the role he played in seven murders, 31 cases of torture and 42 kidnappings. La Plata's First Federal Tribunal determined Von Wernich played a pivotal role in the system of illegal repression that operated in Buenos Aires province, abusing the confession procedure to elicit information from detainees held in secret cells before turning them over to face torture, murder or "disappearance." The three-member tribunal condemned Von Wernich's actions as part of the "genocide" committed in Argentina during the Dirty War years. The tribunal sentenced Von Wernich to life in prison.

¶3. (U) Von Wernich is the third ex-military official from the period of Argentina's Dirty War, and the first ecclesiastical authority, to be prosecuted and convicted since the 2005 Argentine Supreme Court decision that declared unconstitutional immunity protections for Dirty War ex-military officials. He was sentenced to life in prison. Relatives of the alleged tortured or "disappeared," human

rights activists and others outside the Mar del Plata courthouse cheered the verdict, some citing decades of work that finally culminated in Von Wernich's conviction. President Kirchner and other GOA officials praised the court decision.

The Catholic Church Weighs In

¶4. (U) Following the verdict, the Buenos Aires Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church issued a press statement calling on Von Wernich to repent and publicly seek forgiveness. The Archdiocese said the Argentine Catholic Church was disturbed by the pain caused by one of its priests' participation in such serious crimes. The statement added that the prosecution of the crimes should be a step toward Argentine reconciliation and serve as a wake up call for citizens to put elements of impunity, hate and spite behind them. The bishops also touched on a self-critical diocese statement issued in 1997, reminding that church leadership and laypersons alike involved in these or similar crimes acted on their own responsibility. October 11 press reports indicate that the Church will initiate its own internal proceedings, possibly to defrock Von Wernich.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) Von Wernich's conviction and sentencing are a significant milestone in Argentina's ongoing efforts to seek justice in the cases of major human rights violations from the 1970s. They also draw attention to the support given by

Roman Catholic clergy to both sides in the Dirty War. Many on the political left allege the Church was complicit with atrocities committed by the state and believe the Church has failed to account or atone for its actions. As noted above, the Church has not yet disciplined nor defrocked Von Wernich but has sought to distance itself from the unauthorized, maverick operations of rogue priests. Nonetheless, at a time when some observers consider Roman Catholic primate Cardinal Bergoglio to be a leader of the opposition to the Kirchner administration because of his comments about social issues, the Von Wernich case could also have the effect, some believe, of undermining the Church's (and, by extension, Cardinal Bergoglio's) moral authority or capacity to comment on political, social or economic questions.

WAYNE